Chapter 9
What Motivates People to Customize Apparel Online?

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ABSTRACT

The adoption of customizing features is expected to provide a strategic advantage to e-retailers that want to move forward in a competitive environment. The goal of this chapter is to identify a variety of aspects of consumer perceptions on e-customization for apparel shopping and to understand what can motivate the willingness of consumers to participate in the value creation process. A survey was conducted using developed customization websites for the ordering of a pair of jeans. Data were collected from 213 female college students in the U.S. Their statements after experiencing the customization process were analyzed and categorized into three dimensions of benefits (usefulness, convenience, and fun/enjoyment) and five dimensions of costs (risk, limitation, self-assurance, time consumption, and unappealing) of e-customization. Based on the findings, two discussion topics were drawn: why people are willing or unwilling to customize apparel online. Insights are generated and future research directions are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Customization is an important part of modern supply chain management, and the business strategy such as mass customization has been well established in practice. Undoubtedly, customization reflects the shifting marketing focus from sellers to buyers (Wind, 2001). In the past, buyers passively chose standardized products offered by sellers, but, increasingly, buyers are actively participating in the production process to create products that meet their own values (Meuter, Bitner, Ostrom, & Brown, 2005). As a consequence, the traditionally separate roles of companies and consumers are not clear anymore; consumers participate in the value creation process as "co-producers" or "customizing consumers." The ultimate goal of customization is to offer personalization to individuals, which will result in customer brand loyalty (Holland & Baker, 2001). The environment of abundant information in today's society makes consumers more knowledgeable; they know what they need and want and have confidence in their product choices (Moynagh & Worsley, 2002).

The efforts of marketers to meet individual needs and wants were initiated in off-line con-

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texts under the practice of mass customization, but such efforts are now offered by e-retailers, as well (e-customization). Since Dell.com began providing customized computers, other e-retailers have started to offer customized medicine, food, home furnishings, and apparel. In particular, apparel products have a great opportunity for e-customization since apparel is one of the most popularly selling categories in online shopping and customers have identified apparel as one of the most appropriate items for customization (Goldsmith & Freiden, 2004). Although e-retailers are adopting customization as a strategy for managing and building long-term relationships with their customers, not all companies look to continue to use the strategy. One reason for the failure of e-customization could be the lack of understanding of its customers; how customers perceive e-customization may influence their behavioral intentions and the success of the business. Thus, the goal of this study is to explore different aspects of consumer perceptions of e-customization for apparel and to provide implications to academics and practitioners.

CUSTOMIZATION APPROACHES IN E-RETAILING

E-retailers provide customization experiences to their customers through internal and external approaches (Ansari & Mela, 2003). Internal customization, which is on-site customization, can be initiated by users (customers) who want to tailor products, services, and information to meet their desired outcomes. This customer-initiated customization gives users a feeling of control but will be successful only when users have the confidence and knowledge for the process. Internal customization can also be initiated by companies. One example of company-initiated customization is product recommendations based on references or the past purchase history of individuals. Company-initiated customization can be offered through external customization approaches as well, such as emailing potential customers personalized content and designs linked to a website. This process increases the chances of enticing the customers to visit the website by clicking the links in the email.

Apparel e-retailers have employed internal and external approaches to provide customized products and information, as well as related services to augment the customization experience. In the early 2000s, a great deal of interest was shown in adopting customization in the apparel industry. The use of customization capabilities among the top 100 apparel companies in the year 2000 increased 120% compared with the previous year (Kelly, 2000). LandsEnd.com began offering customized products in 2001 with men's and women's khaki pants and then expanded its product assortment to include jeans, outerwear, chinos, dress pants, and other items (Scardino, 2004). Later, the company limited its customized orders to only men's dress shirts, and now customization is offered only through the choice of selected sets of monograms, embroidery, and engraving to be added to purchased merchandise. While other e-retailers of various sizes are adopting customization features in their apparel lines, additional features such as a virtual try-on system using a 3-D face model or avatar can be used to enhance this business practice. The virtual try-on system allows a user to test the fit of an item before making a purchasing decision. This system is designed to improve customization experiences on websites, thus it is important for the successful implementation of the strategy in the apparel and footwear industries (Luh, Wang, Chang, Chang, & Chu, 2013).

Previous researchers have suggested that adopting customization would be an effective strategy for e-retailers for managing and building long-term relationships with their customers. (Ribbink, Van Riel, Liljander, & Streukens, 2004). However, not all findings were positive toward online customization. Lee and Lin (2005) examined the influence of e-retailers' use of customization on consumer

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